

Trinity Church
Matthew 1:24

Father Doyle's beautiful sermon of last Sunday gives us a great start for our thoughts about today's Gospel. Drawing on his study of psychology, Father Doyle told us that for each of us, our character is shaped, for good or ill, by the significant people in our young lives; and especially our parents. If you want to know what kind of man a boy is likely to become, look at the father -- assuming that there is a father in the picture, but that points us in a different direction.

I'm talking in terms of fathers and sons. The same principle probably applies to girls and their mothers, as well. But the Gospel for this day is about the very particular relationship between a father and a son. So in this story we come to Joseph: the man God chose to be the human father to his own human Son; and the thing that sets Joseph apart for this pivotal role in history is the grand dimension of his character.

Throughout the centuries, the church has made much of the role of Mary, and properly so. But the result has been to push Joseph so far into the background as to be almost unnoticed except as that silent figure in the shadows. Joseph had no part in the mystery of Jesus birth, but his influence on that divine Son had to be immense. That's the way God works! God chooses and uses the talents and energies of men and women -- the instruments of human strength and character -- to accomplish his divine purposes. And that's the way it had to have happened in the life of the one who would in the end appear as the glorious Christ.

We don't know much about Jesus' boyhood and youth. What we do know is that he passed through those normal stages in human development -- infancy to childhood to adolescence and on to adulthood. It had to be that way. Jesus could not have been fully human without passing through those ordinary life experiences within the context of his own traditional culture. That is what "incarnation" means. He had to be as human as we are, and in that process of moving through all of those stages in his growth, the one chosen to be his guide and example was Joseph.

Pious imagination has tried to fill in the biographical gaps. There are some wonderful stories from the literature of the early Church about Jesus as a child, already showing the signs of divine power: He makes clay birds, breathes on them and they fly away. A playmate dies in a fall from a rooftop, and the boy, Jesus, restores him to life before anyone learns of the accident -- and so on.

Even the history of art shows those efforts to make the infant Jesus something more than a human child. In the earliest paintings of the Madonna and Child-- and in the Orthodox tradition of icons to this day -- Jesus looks like a little old man, his right hand raised, the fingers positioned as in a priestly blessing. It isn't until the later renaissance that the pattern is relaxed, and Jesus begins to look like a real baby, the Virgin a real mother.

All of that is religious sentimentality, however fascinating it may be, and I don't intend to knock

it, either. In the art, at least, there is the sense of a window into the divine mystery. But to imagine Jesus' growth between infancy and maturity with some degree of realism, we can do no better than to look to Joseph on the same premise that Father Doyle introduced a week ago. Modern psychology aside, in the patriarchal culture of Jesus' day, the responsibility in any family was assigned to the father. So in God's plan, what sort of man did God choose to be the earthly father to his divine Son?

The bare and straightforward language of Matthew's gospel cloaks a powerful human story. It is too familiar to need repetition of the details: It is discovered that a young woman, legally contracted to marry, but not yet married, is expecting a child -- a scandal. Stern Judaic law and custom required a stern remedy, and the contracted husband had to decide what it would be. The choices were three: the woman's death by stoning, a public and vindictive renunciation, or a private setting-aside of the marriage contract. The only course not open was to do nothing. He had to make the choice.

Joseph did not make up his mind hastily. He considered the matter thoughtfully and most certainly with a heavy heart. And then, in the midst of the confusion of feelings and the press of decision, he had a dream, a dream that opened the other, the otherwise unthinkable option: the one of taking Mary as his wife, with all of its implications -- and that is what he did.

It would be entirely too simple to assume that the dream solved Joseph's dilemma once and for all, or put all of his doubts to rest. What the dream did was to open a new direction and to suggest an enormous possibility -- but it answered no questions. The decision was still squarely up to Joseph. All he had was the encouraging word that he "need not be afraid" to take Mary as his wife. The decision that he made is the evidence both of his fundamental compassion and his own abiding faith in the wisdom of God.

All of life is like that. We all have felt it in moments of hard decision. Reflection and prudence, law and tradition, desire and courage, common sense -- all play their part in helping us decide what we should do in this confusing human life; but in the long run we all have to decide on our own, to fly by the seat of our pants, hoping that our planning has been intelligent, our intentions true and our faith pure-- and also knowing that in none of that are we entirely free of mortal selfishness or stubborn blindness to the plain truth. If things turn out well, we know that it is by grace; and if they turn out badly, we know that we bear much of the blame. We have to decide if we have heard God's message correctly; and on that decision we stake our lives. Joseph chose to believe that God had spoken to him in and through his personal anguish; and his decision to act on that word, asking for no guarantees, is the mark of his faithfulness.

Such a courageous choice ran against all of Joseph's religious upbringing and cultural imperatives and expectations. His compassion was stronger than his fear of what people would think when the old wives started counting months on their fingers. He was persuaded that his family's honor, legal tradition and his own public reputation were not the decisive considerations in attempting to discern the will of Almighty God.

Years later, that same rare kind of moral courage surfaced time and time again in the actions and

teachings of Jesus -- in his willingness to go against all worldly authority -- all popular expectation and savvy prudence -- and take the dangerous pathway when mission and purpose required it --- even the pathway to the cross. Jesus had become his own man, but as in every man there is always the unseen presence of his father.

I like to think that a lot of this has to do with work. One of the few things that the gospels say about Joseph is that he was a carpenter -- a “tektonos” in Mathew’s Greek -- a technician, a skilled worker with his hands, a craftsman. There is every reason to believe that many of the qualities and values of Joseph the carpenter were passed on to his human son as they labored together according to the ways of traditional craftspeople. That is a great privilege for any son, to work together with a father and to learn how to do the work from the first small and elementary tasks to a full and companionate partnership. Later on, that working relationship was made explicit when the people of the Nazareth synagogue asked in awe and wonder, “Is this not the carpenter’s son?”

Mark’s gospel takes it one step farther. As I chased that word “carpenter” through the texts I made an astounding discovery, something I had never before noticed: In Mark’s version, the people say not, “Is this not the carpenter’s son?” They say “Is this the carpenter? ” -- as though Jesus had earned the title for himself. Did that skill of working with things, crafting things, pass into the very hands of the one who would lay them on men and women and heal them? -- hands that felt the cuts and scrapes and splinters of woodworking and would finally suffer the nails of the cross?

In taking Mary as his wife and acknowledging the child as his own, Joseph inherited a tremendous privilege and responsibility. It signified a role for Joseph in the entire history of creation. It was his obligation as father to give the child his name, the name that was revealed to him in his dream: “You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” That’s what the name means in Joseph’s native Aramaic: Jeshua: “God saves.”

There is more here than holy history. It is a sign of how God works: how God partners with ordinary as well as extraordinary men and women to bring about his saving purpose -- calling on their resources of faith and moral courage, with no guarantees. This is the holiness of Joseph. This, too, is incarnation. It is the people we live and work with, the ones who share our sorrow and rejoicing, it is they, also, who can teach us who God is, and who we really are. They also are part of the wondrous mystery of God with us.